The Arctic: Geopolitical issues

THE GEOPOLITICAL ISSUES THAT PRESENT themselves in the Arctic region are truly circumpolar in character, reflecting the competing and complementary interests of the eight states that surround the Arctic Ocean: Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States. Although geography, climate, and, above all, conflicting political ideologies and distrust have impeded interaction among these states on Arctic issues in the past, such interaction has broadened and intensified in recent decades, reflecting the fundamental changes that are taking place in the region. In the process, by virtue of the dynamics unique to the circumpolar states, the Arctic is acquiring a stronger regional identity.

General characteristics of Arctic geopolitics

The nature of the Arctic geopolitical dynamic is changeable, depending on various factors. For example, the size of the state, politically or geographically, does not bear proportionately on those dynamics: both small and large states have succeeded in asserting their interests. The precise dynamics are specific to the issue at stake: some issues play out multilaterally, and others bilaterally. Likewise, clashes of interests and collaborative initiatives can occur simultaneously, regardless of whether the players are allies or adversaries. The Arctic, then, is not a global commons like its opposite pole, Antarctica. Instead, its geopolitics are informed by the interests, whether direct or indirect, conflicting or communal, of states whose territory lies partly or entirely in the earth's most northerly regions. That the states in question are advanced and highly developed is an important feature of the region's geopolitics. All of these factors combine to characterize the geopolitics of the Arctic.

Historical secondary status. Historically, unlike other lands and continents, the Arctic has not been the focus of brutal territorial conquest and competition. Instead, it has featured in inter-state relations as a corollary to extra-regional issues.

The peripheral status of the Arctic was exemplified during the Cold War, a roughly 40-year period defined by intense distrust between the United States and its allies in the West and the Soviet Union and its allies in the East. Indeed, the East–West stand-off was centred on the peoples and economic and political systems of continental Europe; as a result, the rival sides devoted their resources and first order of response there. Unlike other parts of the world, which served as proxies in the Cold War struggle, the Arctic played an auxiliary role as a region that afforded the shortest route through which increasingly advanced defence technologies, such as long-range bombers, submarines and missiles, might be trained on an adversary. Likewise, the Arctic served as a base for early warning against such threats. In other words, the Arctic was not viewed as a prize in itself during the Cold War, but was instead valued for its strategic utility.

During the Cold War, as their foreign policies matured and developed, the circumpolar countries' pursuit of more promising and rewarding economic, political and security relations with neighbouring states or regions to their south, or at least in their immediate or trans-Atlantic hemisphere, rather than with their trans-Arctic neighbours, reinforced the Arctic's secondary status. For instance, the Nordic countries of Europe were drawn to participate in bodies such as the Nordic Council (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and their sub-national parliaments), the European Union (Denmark, Finland, Sweden), the European Free Trade Association (Iceland, Norway), and NATO (Denmark, Iceland, Norway). For that matter, Sweden's Baltic orientation is often raised as a reason to dismiss any pretensions it may have to being an Arctic state. In Finland's case, foreign relations were dominated by neutrality, defined by a special relationship with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union (later Russia), preoccupied with strategic concerns and empire maintenance, was oriented toward relations with the Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe and the neighbouring states along its long southern border. Moreover, Canada's economic and security priorities, whether continental or trans-Atlantic, were increasingly defined by its relationship with the United States, which was itself preoccupied by the East–West tensions.

Contemporary geopolitics

The end of the Cold War has had a mixed impact on the Arctic's ranking among the geopolitical issues of the circumpolar states. On the one hand, it diminished the level of importance the Arctic held in North American defence. On the other hand, disputes over sovereignty that lurked under the surface have continued to complicate relations. In addition, Arctic geopolitics has been affected by new issues, some arising from changing climate conditions, that have raised the profile of the Arctic in foreign policy dynamics. The cumulative effect has been the portrayal in some circles, particularly the media, of a region ripe with real and potential inter-state disputes.

Disputes over sovereignty. The most fundamental geopolitical issue concerning the Arctic states has been sovereignty, specifically the interests, policies and actions that affirm the sovereignty of the states in the region vis-à-vis one another, such as the determination of borders, exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and international legal principles governing access to marine passages (see box). Although such disputes are not pervasive, that they exist and remain unsettled presents an image of the Arctic as replete with territorial disputes.

The unresolved nature of these cases has heightened the geopolitical sensitivities of the states in question. As a result, ad hoc, isolated incidents – whether intentional or innocent, minor or major – have tended to be perceived as violations of

Outstanding disputes among states of the Arctic circumpolar region[1]

Canada and Denmark: Hans Island. A small (1.3 km^2), unpopulated island located in the Arctic Strait between Greenland and Ellesmere Island, Hans Island is claimed by both Canada and Denmark, which agreed in 1973, while negotiating delimitations in the Arctic, to delay a final settlement. Since then both Denmark and Canada have attempted to keep their respective claims to sovereignty over the island active with irregular diplomatic and military visits, prompting protests from the other country.

Norway and Russia: the Barents Sea. A 1976 Barents Sea Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) delimitation agreement between Norway and Russia excludes the 155,000 km^2 area referred to as the "Grey Zone" between the Norwegian archipelago and the Russian islands of Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land. A 1978 Grey Zone Agreement between the two countries manages their access to this area for economic purposes until a final agreement can be reached; this agreement has been renewed annually since 1978 by Norway and Russia.

The 1920 Paris Treaty gave Norway sovereignty over the archipelago and island of Svalbard (formerly Spitsbergen) in the Barents Sea. Accordingly, since 1977 Norway has exercised its claim to the 200-mile EEZ zone as per international law and has established a fisheries protection there against Russia's protests that it has legitimate access and rights to the same area.

Russia and the United States: the Bering Sea. In 1990, the then–Soviet Union and the United States signed a Maritime Boundary Agreement delimiting their borders in the Bering Sea, Arctic Ocean and northern Pacific Ocean. It included an agreement over a disputed area of 50,000 km^2 as belonging to the United States. The Russian parliament, the Duma, has objected to the transfer of Russian territory and the loss of revenue from fisheries resources; as a result, the agreement has not been ratified by Russia, which has agreed to abide by it on a provisional basis only.[2] The United States Senate ratified the agreement in 1991.

Canada and the United States: the Beaufort Sea and the Northwest Passage. An 1825 Convention between Great Britain and Russia set a maritime border between present-day Alaska and what is now Canada along the 141st meridian. This border has come into question in light of the potential wealth of offshore oil and gas deposits. The United States rejects the earlier delimitation in preference to one based on equidistance from the two land masses. This dispute remains unresolved.

Canada considers the waters of the Northwest Passage to be internal waters and accordingly claims control over their navigation and access. In contrast, the United States perceives the waters as an international strait, arguing for its part that control and access should be governed accordingly.

sovereignty and access rights, subsequently elevating the geopolitical temperature in the region and seeming to contribute to an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust among the circumpolar states.

Raised profile of the Arctic. The Arctic's profile in the foreign policies of the countries concerned has been raised over the last 20 years in large part as a result of climate change and its implications for the future of the region. In particular, the effects of climate change have either intensified the geopolitical disputes that already exist, generated new ones or raised the potential for others. For instance, the melting sea ice has intensified speculation about the increased potential usability of the Northwest Passage for the shipment of goods between Europe and Asia. Some predict that the shortened distance will reduce the costs of shipping, making the Passage an attractive alternative to the Panama Canal. As a result, the question in the Canada–US relationship of whether the Northwest Passage is an international strait or internal Canadian waters has gained an added dimension, since a final determination of its status would decide how such increased traffic would be regulated.[3]

Moreover, melting sea ice has facilitated the efforts of states such as Russia, Canada and Denmark to carry out mapping exercises to delineate their respective continental shelves according to the 1982 *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS) and to stake their legal claims to potentially lucrative rights. The results of these exercises have included high levels of media attention and a perceived increase in suspicion and distrust. In this respect, preliminary announcements of the results of these mapping exercises suggest that Canada and Russia may find themselves in conflict over the Lomonosov Ridge, which extends under the Arctic Ocean between North America and Eurasia. The reaction generated among Canadians in the summer of 2007 when a Russian flag was deposited in a titanium capsule on the floor of the Arctic Ocean as a gesture of technological capability is one example of the heightened politics that accompany this matter. Indeed, potentially competing territorial and maritime claims are expected to remain a feature of Arctic geopolitics for many years to come, especially in light of the lengthy international legal processes that will govern their settlement.

The changing climate in the Arctic, combined with improved technologies and market conditions, has also facilitated increased access to the region's natural resources.[4] For the most part the Arctic countries thus far have limited their extractive activities to their recognized sovereign territories. However, the generally accepted view that vast resources lie undiscovered in the Arctic[5] has raised the stakes in the unsettled border disputes and threatens to harden negotiating positions. This includes in particular the disputes between Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea, the United States and Canada in the Beaufort Sea, and Russia and the United States in the Bering Sea (see box).

Recent individual actions and announcements on the part of the circumpolar states provide further evidence of the Arctic's new profile and its growing importance. For instance, several American military leaders acknowledged in August 2008 that the United States needs to pay increasing attention to the security risks that are posed in the region as a result of climate changes, increased access and resource development. Such increased attention would also include an assessment of American capabilities, particularly with respect to icebreakers.[6]

Moreover, the European Union is paying greater attention to the Arctic as an issue ripe for policy development. In 2006, it established a Northern Dimension Policy in partnership with Iceland, Norway and Russia in order to promote dialogue and sustainable development in Northern Europe. There is also great anticipation surrounding the planned 2008 release of the European Commission's "Communication on the Arctic Region." This policy outlook is expected to highlight the European Union's role in protecting the Arctic environment, managing the sustainable use of Arctic resources, and leading efforts on a new multilateral agreement on Arctic management.[7]

For its part, Russia has increased military activities in the region, often raising security concerns in neighbouring countries because of the operations' proximity to international frontiers.[8] In September 2008, Russia's National Security Council convened at a base on one of its northernmost territories in the Franz Jozef archipelago. In addition, there have been reports that Russian President Dmitri Medvedev has called for legislation that unilaterally demarcates Russia's borders in the Arctic.[9]

Cooperation and geopolitics of the Arctic

Geopolitical issues are not exclusively conflicts over interests, although such concerns tend to dominate.

They can also reflect cooperative, multilateral initiatives by which a state pursues its interests vis-à-vis other states. Such cooperative ventures are often considered desirable and even unavoidable when a state is seeking a result that cannot be achieved unilaterally. At the same time, cooperation frequently establishes a level of governance – in some cases formally, in others less formally – by which mutual understanding can clarify intentions and help to build trust.

In a similar fashion, the states of the circumpolar north have established various multilateral arrangements by which to manage expectations and correct misperceptions. During the Cold War, these arrangements more frequently featured small groupings of the states involved, defined in terms of sub-regions as described earlier, such as the arrangement between Canada and the United States concerning the defence of North America,[10] which itself was a subset of the cooperation among the northern member states of NATO (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the United States), or the grouping of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden). Indeed, the advantages to be gained by such arrangements are demonstrated in the case of Iceland which, without the capacity to maintain a military force, was vulnerable to various threats to its sovereignty and interests and had to enter into alliances to secure its objectives. Even so, some cooperative arrangements on common issues of concern were established across ideologies in areas such as scientific technical cooperation and, to a certain extent, nuclear disarmament.

However, an architecture of institutions and agreements for the Arctic had no opportunity to advance further until the end of the Cold War. In this regard, environmental concerns, such as climate change, pollution and the protection of resources, stand out as issues that transcend borders and unilateral responses. One of the most dominant examples in this regard concerns UNCLOS, which governs the use of the earth's oceans and seas, including the Arctic Ocean and its surrounding seas, and in part seeks to ensure its environmental integrity. The 1991 Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy signed by the eight circumpolar states represents a regionally defined environmental arrangement by which the parties agree to protect the Arctic's marine environment, jointly prepare and respond to emergencies, conserve flora and fauna, and monitor and assess contaminants.[11]

In 1996 the Arctic Council, a Canada-led intergovernmental forum, was launched with the eight circumpolar states. Since then it has functioned as the pre-eminent circumpolar association through which issues and concerns related to the environment, sustainable development, and social and economic matters are discussed. It has integrated the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy into its activities and has addressed other environmental and non-environmental issues, such as emergency preparedness and prevention and the health status of Arctic populations. Of additional note is the European Parliament's passage of a resolution in October 2008 calling on the European Commission to consider becoming an observer to the Arctic Council and to establish a dedicated Arctic desk.[12]

Some multilateral initiatives are less formal. For instance, in May 2008, five of the circumpolar countries (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States) met in Greenland and agreed to allow the procedures established by UNCLOS to determine the competing claims being made.

An important aspect of cooperation in the Arctic is the existence of non-governmental fora, which have increasingly featured the interests and cross-cultural links among peoples and nations, in particular Aboriginal groups. In this respect, the interests and concerns not only of states but also of non-state groups have informed the geopolitics of the Arctic and given it a new dimension.[13] This includes the participation of such groups in the Arctic Council as well as the establishment of other cooperative fora such as the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich'in Council International, the Aleut International Association, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, and the Saami Council. These groups are concerned with, among other issues, promoting the rights and interests of indigenous peoples internationally.

Despite the existence of these councils and organizations, the Arctic is without a single, comprehensive and developed regime by which to govern state behaviour in the region. According to those who argue for such a regime, the councils and organizations that do exist are limited in scope, have unequal levels of membership, confuse decision-making procedures because of the variety of levels involved and are generally ineffective. They also point to the failure of the United States to ratify

UNCLOS, which it signed in 1994, as a factor that could undermine UNCLOS' potential effectiveness and any confidence in its capacity to manage expectations about continental shelf extensions.[14] Thus, without the benefit of a regime that is comprehensive in terms of the issues it addresses and state and non-state membership, the risk of misperception and ineffectiveness will continue.[15]

Others, however, see value and efficiency in a division of labour and consider the multiplicity of organizations as advantageous. By this argument, members of an organization are more likely to achieve results if they focus on a limited number of issues with a greater potential for agreement. Hence, it makes sense that the Arctic Council does not address issues such as security and defence, which would be highly divisive and undermine any well-placed intentions to collaborate.[16]

Conclusion

Thus far, the geopolitical landscape of the Arctic has avoided the dimension of high politics. However, this may change in light of evolving perceptions of the values and stakes offered by the region. As this landscape changes, literally and figuratively, the multiplicity of northern and non-northern actors[17] — states, indigenous populations, cities, industries and various other cross-border networks — will become a more prominent feature in any examination of prevailing interests and the scope of cooperative initiatives. How, and the extent to which, the Arctic's regional identity will continue to evolve remains an open question.

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SOURCES

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